

Dental Care for the Cancer Patient

by Dr. Amelia Chan and Yolanda Menshari



PROFITABLE PRACTICE

Your doctor has delivered the news that you have cancer. You may be experiencing disbelief, numbness and fear. You are compelled to embark on a journey to manage your condition and restore your health.

For many years, we have had the opportunity and experience to treat patients and recommend a regime of preventative procedures before and during cancer treatments, resulting in little if any changes in the general condition of their mouth afterward.

We have also treated patients after they have had radiation and/or chemotherapy. The condition of their mouths would have been much better if they had the necessary dental care before they started cancer treatment. Many patients felt their dental care was not a priority relative to their cancer diagnosis, and when they returned after completing their cancer treatment months later their mouth was in very poor condition with new areas of tooth decay and gum disease.

For those who have had chemotherapy, surgery, and/or radiation, you may experience a host of side effects in the mouth, such as dry mouth known as Xerostomia,

cavities and gum disease. *Thus, dental care is a priority before and during cancer therapy.*

If you have had radiation treatment and/or are about to undergo radiation treatment you may have concerns regarding dental x-rays. The radiation emitted from the new advanced digital dental x-rays is minimal compared to the amount of the radiation from cancer treatment. Digital dental x-rays emit less than half the radiation of traditional x-rays. If radiation exposure from dental x-rays are a concern, be sure to inquire whether your dental office offers digital x-ray imaging.

Keeping track of your blood work from your oncologist, surgeon and/or general practitioner is important and an updated copy should be given to your dentist. Your white blood cell count and platelets may be abnormally low after chemotherapy; therefore, it is probably best not to proceed with dental treatment that involves any form of bleeding since your healing capacity may be compromised. In many cases, it may be wiser to wait until these counts are closer to the normal range.

You may have a Hickman line, which is a special IV tube inserted into a large vein near your heart. It's used for chemotherapy, other medications,

and/or withdrawal of blood for testing. Hickman lines remain in place when long-term IV access is required. You will be required to take antibiotics before commencing any dental treatment that may cause bleeding, such as cleanings and extractions.

This decreases the likelihood of a blood infection originating from bacteria in the mouth, which can be dangerous if your immune system has already been compromised by cancer and/or chemotherapy.

Radiation, chemotherapy and/or other medications can decrease your saliva flow. Saliva acts as a natural buffer, which neutralizes the acids in our mouth that occur each time we eat. Saliva also helps clear food particles which linger in the mouth.

One of the most common side effects in the mouth is Xerostomia, also known as dry mouth. Xerostomia can cause many symptoms such as ulcers, cankers of the mouth, oral thrush (fungus/yeast infection), tooth decay, gum disease, halitosis (bad breath) and overall discomfort of the soft tissues. With so many products on the market, you can feel overwhelmed when making decisions regarding your oral care.

Products containing Xylitol are a very helpful adjunct in the management of Xerostomia. Xylitol is a natural sweetener made from vegetable sources that has very little effect on blood sugar levels. Xylitol also elicits an increase in oral pH and salivary flow. Tooth decay-causing bacteria such as streptococcus mutans, cannot digest Xylitol; therefore, bacterial colonies are less likely to form. Xylitol can also help bad breath as well. Breath mints, chewing gum and rinses containing Xylitol can be purchased through your dental professional, health food store or pharmacy.

For preventative care, there are treatments such as fluoride rinses and varnishes that decrease the risk of tooth decay and gingivitis (gum disease), by inhibiting the growth of bacteria and decreasing plaque. In addition, it is possible to re-mineralize the enamel surface and reverse the initial decay process. If you prefer an alternative solution there are various toothpastes and rinses that contain organic antimicrobial agents, and/or contain calcium phosphates that have re-mineralizing properties.

Timing of necessary dental work is essential. You should have a thorough dental examination, necessary dental x-rays and complete the necessary procedures to achieve optimal health of the gums and teeth, before chemotherapy, cancer related intravenous (IV) bisphosphonate treatment and/or radiation treatment. Bisphosphonates are a class of drugs used to treat cancer related problems and oral forms are used in the management of osteoporosis to increase bone density.

Dental infections and/or treatment such as extractions and gum surgery after radiation to the head and neck area, and/or cancer related IV bisphosphonate treatment can increase the risk of a serious problem that causes rotting or necrosis of the jawbone. In circumstances where the bisphosphonates are responsible, the term BRONJ also known as Bisphosphonate-Related Osteonecrosis of the Jaw can occur. BRONJ appears as exposed bone in the jaw that does not heal. BRONJ is painful and difficult to treat, therefore prevention of this condition is extremely important, by performing any necessary extraction(s) and/or gum surgery before radiation and/or cancer related IV bisphosphonate treatment.

Low levels of vitamin D and calcium are related to poor gum health; however, please consult with your health care team before you start taking any dietary supplements since they can interfere with cancer treatments.

Finally, it is important to maintain optimal oral hygiene, due to the increased risk of conditions such as gum disease, tooth decay, ulcers and other conditions in your mouth. You can benefit greatly from having a dental professional closely monitor for changes in your oral health and recommending the appropriate products.

Bottom Line: It is vital to your overall health that you receive optimal oral health care before, during and after your cancer therapy.



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